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Education



Are Our Children Learning?

Foundational learning in the early years of school

A policy briefing for Members of Parliament in Malawi | July 2026



Foundational literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional skills are the bedrock for all future learning. When children develop these skills by age 10, they are more likely to stay in school, earn more, and contribute fully to society.

Yet too many children in Malawi are being left behind. Only 19 percent of children aged 7–14 can read with understanding, and just 13 percent demonstrate basic numeracy.

Improving learning in the early grades requires urgent and sustained action. The Government of Malawi has made strong political commitments and is working with civil society and development partners to translate commitments to meaningful change for Malawi's youngest citizens.

Parliament has a critical role to play in delivering this mission.

Through oversight, legislation, and budget approval, Members of Parliament can help ensure these commitments lead to measurable foundational learning gains.

This briefing sets out the evidence, explains why foundational learning must be prioritised and recommends practical actions parliament can take to ensure every child is learning.

Introduction

A well-educated population is essential to Malawi's progress and prosperity. It strengthens human capital, supports the workforce, and drives economic and social development.

This is clearly recognised in Malawi's Vision 2063, which identifies education as an enabler to becoming an "inclusive, wealthy and self-reliant nation by 2063". It highlights the importance of quality education across all levels, from early childhood, primary, secondary, tertiary and higher education.

In line with this vision, Malawi has made significant progress in expanding equitable access to quality education.

In 1994, Malawi launched the Free Primary Education (FPE) policy, abolishing tuition fees, resulting in a massive surge in primary school enrollment.

In 2025, the government introduced the Free Secondary Education Policy, similarly abolishing tuition fees and other school fees in public secondary schools, thereby increasing enrolment. It is also introducing a new pre-primary class to provide 5-year-olds with one year of early childhood education to support school readiness and early primary-grade skills like reading.

With support from the UK Government and USAID, the government rolled out nationwide reforms in mathematics and reading. The UK-supported National Numeracy Curriculum Reform Programme is recognised internationally as one of the most impactful interventions in primary mathematics.

Despite these gains, most children are not learning: only 19 percent of children aged 7–14 can read with understanding, and only 13 percent demonstrate basic numeracy.¹ Furthermore, the World Bank's Human Capital Index (HCI) estimates that children born in Malawi will be 41 percent as productive when they grow up as they could be if they enjoyed complete education and full health.

This demands urgent attention from all stakeholders and across all levels of the political spectrum. With a growing youthful population, prioritising education is one of the best ways to ensure Malawi's youngest citizens can reach their potential and contribute meaningfully to national progress.

In July 2026, Malawi will host the third Africa Foundational Learning Exchange (FLEX) Conference, bringing together governments, donors and partners from across the continent and beyond. Malawi is also a signatory to UNICEF's Commitment to Action for Foundational Learning² and the FLEX 2024 Ministerial Declaration³, demonstrating clear political leadership, in line with many other African countries on this issue.

It is within this context of strong political commitment, but slow gains in foundational learning, that this briefing is presented to Honourable Members of the Malawian National Assembly.

It aims to support Parliament in exercising its unique functions to ensure that commitments translate into sustained action, so that every child in Malawi can access their right to quality education and contribute to achieving Vision 2063.

1. What is foundational learning?

Foundational learning refers to the basic skills children learn in the early years, usually between ages 3 and 10, to succeed in school and life. These include reading, writing, mathematics and socio-emotional skills.

Literacy and numeracy are essential for lifelong learning. Once a child learns to read, they use reading to learn. Once a child understands basic mathematics, such as counting, adding

and subtracting, they can build towards more complex skills such as division, problem-solving and reasoning.

Socio-emotional skills help children manage their emotions, build positive relationships, cooperate with others and develop confidence. These skills support children's learning, well-being and development throughout life.

2. Why is foundational learning important?

Developing foundational skills is critical for all children's learning. Without reading, writing or basic mathematics, it is extremely difficult to progress through the grades and move on to secondary education. Without socio-emotional skills, children may struggle to build relationships, collaborate in the classroom, manage their emotions and participate fully in school.

Low foundational learning in the early grades is one reason why so many children repeat grades in Malawi. The 2023–2024 Malawi Education Statistics Report (EMIS) from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology shows that 39 percent of Standard 1 students repeat the year. Of all children in Standard 1, only 22 per cent are at the right age for the grade. 67 per cent are one or more years older, and 11 per cent are younger than the official starting age.⁴

When children do not acquire the basics from the beginning, it is difficult to catch up without additional support. High repetition rates also means resources are not spent efficiently.

Despite the current shortfalls, foundational learning is one of the best investments a country can make.

When children master the basics in the early years, new research from Indonesia and Pakistan shows remarkable gains:⁵

- Children with stronger literacy and numeracy skills earn 4 to 20 per cent more than those without, showing a significant gain in salary increase.
- When women complete primary school and learn basic literacy skills, their children are 67 per cent less likely to die in infancy.
- Students with stronger foundational maths skills are 50 per cent less likely to drop out of school.

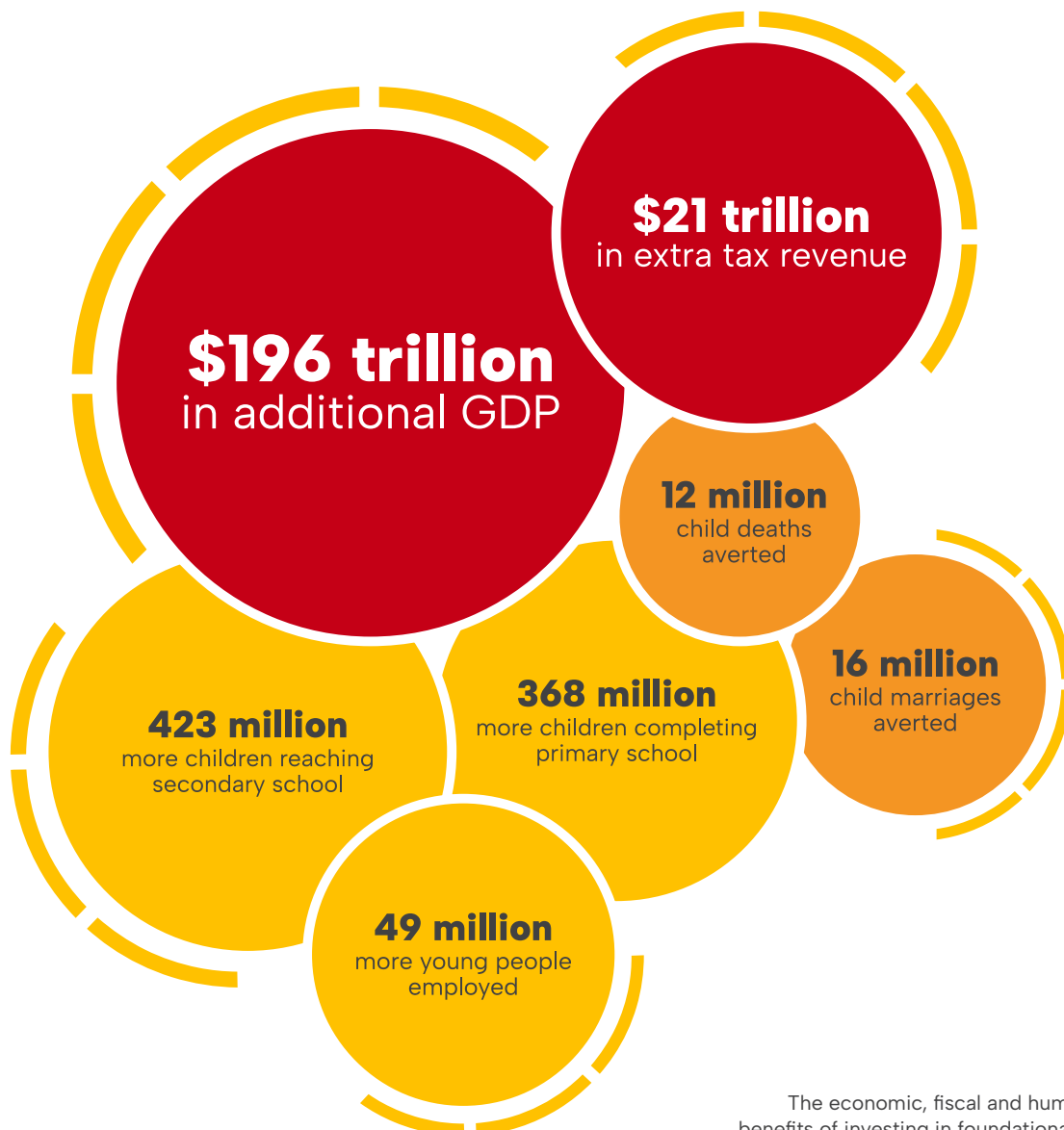
Further research from global experts at the What Works Hub for Global Education finds that if universal foundational learning were achieved it would generate 196 trillion USD in additional economic output – equivalent to

GDP per capita being more than 27 per cent higher by 2050 and over 21 trillion USD in extra tax revenue (2023 USD).⁶

These economic and fiscal outcomes are paired with major human development benefits:

- 368 million more children completing primary school,
- 423 million progressing to secondary,
- 49 million more young people in persistent employment,
- 12 million child deaths averted; and
- 16 million fewer child marriages over 2031–2050.

Prioritising foundational learning therefore makes economic, social and political sense. It enables children to reach their potential, continue through education, increase future earnings, reduce poverty, improve social equity and drive human capital development.



The economic, fiscal and human capital benefits of investing in foundational learning.

3. The state of foundational learning in Malawi

The government of Malawi has a clear political commitment to foundational learning. Civil society organisations, development partners, and philanthropic and country donors also recognise the need to improve early grade learning outcomes, and various initiatives and programmes have been implemented to address needs.

There has been significant progress in improving access to education. Malawi was amongst one of the first countries in Africa to introduce free primary education in 1994. In the first year after the policy change, primary school enrolment tripled from 1.6 million students to over 3 million students.

The huge surge in numbers brought a shortage of classrooms, qualified teachers and resources. These conditions have continued, and most primary schools in Malawi remain under-resourced, under-staffed and under-funded.

Even though more children are attending school, it doesn't equate to learning.

Evidence from the Ministry of Education finds that only 19 percent of children aged 7–14 have foundational reading skills and only 13 percent of children the same age know basic numeracy.

This shows that even though 88 per cent of primary aged children are enrolled in school, the majority of them do not acquire the basic literacy and numeracy skills we expect, and only 33 per cent complete primary education.⁷

Laying the foundation for further learning

Almost 30 years after primary education was made free, the government passed the Free

Secondary Education policy in 2025, marking a significant shift in education policy in Malawi.

Despite this progress, the new secondary education policy is causing issues similar to those in 1995 for primary education. Enrolment is surging, classrooms are overwhelmed, and there aren't enough teachers or books and learning materials.

Expanding access to secondary education will not translate into meaningful learning or improved outcomes if children enter secondary school without foundational skills. Many learners are progressing through primary education without mastering basic literacy and numeracy. As a result, they arrive in secondary school unable to fully engage with the curriculum, increasing the risk of repetition, dropout and poor learning outcomes.

Investing in secondary education without first ensuring strong foundational learning is both inefficient and inequitable. It channels scarce resources into a level of the system where many students are not yet ready to benefit, while failing to address the root cause of low learning outcomes.

By contrast, strengthening foundational learning in the early years offers the highest return on investment. When children acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills early, they are more likely to remain in school, transition successfully to secondary education, and develop higher-order skills. Without these foundations, later investments become significantly less effective.

In practical terms, secondary education systems can only be as strong as the foundations on which comes before them.

4. Priorities for improving foundational learning outcomes

4.1 Supporting children's early development and school readiness

Providing children with high-quality pre-primary education can improve their learning outcomes and yield long-term economic benefits. Research indicates that participation in these programs enhances brain architecture, ensuring better verbal skills and consistently higher academic performance at school entry.⁸

In fact, in countries where more children attend pre-primary programmes, more children learn to read and do mathematics by the end of primary school. Children are also more likely to succeed in later schooling, attain higher levels of education and secure better jobs. This, in turn, contributes to a more skilled and productive workforce, driving economic growth and reducing social inequalities.⁹

Many countries, including Malawi, are currently expanding coverage of pre-primary education as too many children are starting primary school too far behind.

Vision 2063 recognises the importance of early childhood care and education (ECCE) in establishing a strong foundation for further learning. The government is responding to that vision: both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Gender are working to grow the provision of early childhood education.

The National Education Sector Investment Plan (NESIP) Mid Term Review reveals the stark cost of the current gap in early childhood education provision in Malawi. It shows that the country loses an estimated USD 77 million every year due to repetition and dropout – equivalent to about 10 per cent of the national education budget – because children enter Standard 1 without foundational school readiness skills. These losses accumulate year

after year and weaken every subsequent stage of education.

Whilst traditionally community-based care centres (CBCC) have provided early childhood services, including education, the government recognises the need to strengthen the quality of learning opportunities in these years.

In April 2025, the Ministry of Education began piloting a new pre-primary class, known as P-Class, in Salima, Dedza and Nsanje districts with support from UNICEF. It provides an extra year of schooling for children aged 5, supporting the development of children's emergent literacy and numeracy skills, as well as their socio-emotional skills, which help ensure that children are ready to start primary school in Standard 1.

The Government's decision – highlighted in the State of the Nation Address – to elevate a new P-class as a national priority is therefore a timely and strategic step in the right direction. When children start school ready to learn, repetition declines, dropout shrinks, and the system saves money that can be reinvested into quality improvements across all levels.

This new P-class will be provided at primary schools, instead of CBCCs, with a goal to reach 1,000 primary schools from September 2026 with support from the Global Partnership for Education. Ultimately, the goal is to expand until all 7,000 primary schools in Malawi have P-classes.

4.2 Improving the teaching of foundational skills in the early grades of primary school

One of the primary causes of low levels of foundational learning in the first three grades of primary school is the failure to use research-proven instructional methods.

Insufficient books and learning materials, inadequate teacher training and a lack of ongoing professional development, limited class time, instruction in unfamiliar languages, and teaching that doesn't match children's learning levels – all exacerbate the challenge posed by a broader failure to adopt science-based learning methods.

Recent reforms in reading and mathematics, with support from USAID and the UK's Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) respectively, have incorporated science-based methods to teaching. The methodology is known as structured pedagogy and is considered by global experts as one of the 'best buys' to improve foundational learning.¹⁰

With the collapse of USAID and withdrawal of UK-funding to bilateral programming globally, the progress made in Malawi under the National Reading Programme (USAID) and National Mathematics Curriculum Reform Programme (FCDO) are both under threat.

It is critical that this progress is sustained and the evidence-based methods, proven to be working in Malawi, continue to be implemented and teachers continue receiving support to use effective teaching methods.

A deep dive into the evidence

Scientific research now provides clear guidance on how children learn to read and how to teach them effectively.

The Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel (GEEAP) has collected and distilled the available evidence on effective reading instruction in low- and middle-income countries.

Their latest report provides guidance for governments and education stakeholders on how to design and implement effective, evidence-based reading programs to improve literacy outcomes.

The report, titled 'Effective Reading Instruction in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: What the Evidence Shows' is available at www.geeap.org.

5. Agenda for action

5.1 Close gaps between policy and implementation

The policies and bodies responsible for the governance, coordination and provision of education are clearly set out in national policy and recognise the importance of early childhood and primary education.

Malawi's Constitution and Vision 2063 provide the legal framework for quality education for all Malawians. The Education Act of 2013 also outlines key elements of the education system, including the creation of the Teachers Council of Malawi and the Malawi Institute of Education.

However, political commitment and national policy frameworks are not always translated into practical action in communities. As a result, too many children are not acquiring basic foundational skills.

Early childhood education, a vital building block for foundational learning, is not sufficiently prioritised at government level. This is reflected in low budget allocation and weak enforcement of national policy, despite existing frameworks recognising its importance.

We urge Members of Parliament to:

- Request regular reporting from the Ministry of Education on progress against foundational learning commitments.
- Consider legislation to make early childhood education available for every 5-year-old before they start primary school.
- Strengthen parliamentary oversight and accountability for policy implementation in early childhood education and primary schools.
- Visit schools in their constituencies and observe classes to better understand the gap between policy and implementation.



The world from A to U, Mbabzi, Lilongwe, Malawi. Photo Credit: Lars Plougman, [CC BY-SA 2.0](#)

5.2 More and better financing

Financing is a challenge across many sectors of society, and education is no different. Although education receives the largest share of the government budget, the allocation has decreased significantly from 16.6 per cent in 2025/26 to 11.7 per cent in 2026/27, the lowest share in more than a decade. This is also below the 15–20 per cent international benchmark.

Furthermore, domestic financing for basic education and early childhood education has reduced. Over the past five years, spending on tertiary education averaged ten times more than early childhood development, even though evidence shows the importance of investing in the early years.

ECE only receives 0.1 per cent of the education budget, the lowest allocation in any subsector. And even this figure is misleading. Much of Malawi's early childhood funding is channelled through the Ministry of gender, particularly for CBCCs, and does not appear in the Ministry of Education budgets.

As Malawi prepares for national roll-out of the P-class, this fragmentation obscures what is truly being invested, and what additional financing is needed, to deliver quality early learning at scale.

Growth in spending is also constrained by rising debt servicing costs, which account for 27 per cent of the total government budget.¹¹ In addition, IMF restrictions introduced in 1998 limited wage increases and imposed a recruitment freeze on public servants.

These restrictions remain in place, meaning the government cannot recruit enough teachers and therefore current teachers are overburdened.

Statistics from the Ministry of Education in 2020, showed that there was a shortage of 52,459 teachers to reach the benchmark teacher-pupil ratio of 1:40. Recruiting this many teachers is not currently possible, as it would increase the primary education wage bill by 63 per cent.



An attentive pupil, Mbabzi, Lilongwe, Malawi. Photo Credit: Lars Plougman, [CC BY-SA 2.0](#)

Donor support for foundational learning is also declining, despite accounting for 73 per cent of the total education development budget according to UNICEF. The withdrawal of USAID in 2025, a key financial and technical partner in the National Reading Reforms, has left a significant gap in foundational literacy.

Funding for foundational learning should be mobilised not only to recruit and pay teachers, but also to reduce overcrowded classrooms, provide every child with a workbook and improve learning environments.

With bilateral aid to sub-Saharan Africa expected to fall by 16 – 28 per cent,¹² Malawi needs to reduce its long-term reliance on donor support while ensuring remaining external financing is coordinated, targeted and aligned with national priorities.

We urge Members of Parliament to:

- Recognise that foundational learning in early childhood and primary education is critical, but still underfunded.
- Restore education funding towards education in general to at least 15 per cent of the national budget and reallocate a portion towards early childhood education.
- Consider introducing a financing tag for early childhood education in the Ministry of Education, making it easier to track and oversee spending in the early years.
- Encourage the Ministry of Education to strengthen coordination with development partners (through the Education Development Partners Group) while reducing long-term donor reliance, ensuring remaining support aligns with national priorities and protects proven reforms.
- Allocate and ringfence CDF funding for foundational learning, including for infrastructure (eg. classrooms, WASH facilities, teacher accommodation), child-friendly and disability-inclusive classroom furniture, and quality teaching and learning materials.
- Explore innovative domestic financing models. For example, explore introducing an early childhood education levy for companies. Consider this as part of the human capital development agenda in Vision 2063 to encourage companies to invest in future employees.

5.3 Improved support for teachers

Teachers are the beating heart of every education system. They are particularly important during the foundational learning phase, as they support the nation's youngest learners and help set them up for success later in school and life.

Well-trained and well-paid teachers are more motivated and better able to adapt their teaching to support children of all abilities to learn.

Yet huge disparities exist between early childhood, primary and secondary education teachers. In early childhood education, more than 50 per cent of caregivers are trained and most are volunteers.¹³ Primary teachers receive only two years of training and a certificate, while secondary school teachers are trained to undergraduate degree level and receive the highest salaries.

One of the biggest challenges facing foundational literacy is the limited use of evidence-based approaches to teach reading. Over a century of research has identified proven methods for teaching children to read, providing clear guidance on the skills and steps teachers can use in classrooms.

Pre-service training in colleges and in-service training, including Continuous Professional Development, remain inconsistent and sporadic. There is a capacity gap in foundational learning, and teacher training should be revised so that teachers are prepared and confident to teach foundational literacy and numeracy.

We urge Members of Parliament to:

- Recognise the importance of early childhood and primary teachers, and support efforts to value and motivate them.
- Pass legislation to improve teaching qualifications for early childhood and primary education, showing these teachers are equally valued alongside their secondary school counterparts.
- Strengthen teacher training so all early childhood and primary teachers can teach foundational literacy and numeracy using evidence-based approaches, supported by regular CPD and classroom-based support.
- Scrutinise teacher recruitment and deployment to ensure the early grades, especially in under-resourced rural schools, have enough trained teachers
- Ensure stronger accountability so teachers' salaries are paid consistently and on time, reducing absenteeism and improving motivation.

5.4 Community demand and involvement

When low literacy has affected families for generations, and families are focused on immediate needs such as earning an income, children's learning may not be seen as urgent. Many parents may also be unaware that children can be in school but still not learn the basics.

Decades of research show that parental engagement in early childhood education is one of the strongest predictors of a child's school readiness, academic achievement and long-term well-being.¹⁴

There have been government efforts, in collaboration with partners including UNICEF, to improve parental and community involvement in the early years. However, this area remains under-supported, particularly in rural areas.

With low community demand, foundational learning risks being overlooked as a political priority. Communities need to understand the scale of the problem, its impact on children's futures, and the solutions that can improve learning outcomes. As pillars of the community, Members of Parliament are uniquely positioned to help address this.

Greater community involvement would help parents, caregivers and community leaders advocate for change, understand the importance of strong foundational skills, and support children's learning at home and in school.

We urge Members of Parliament to:

- Use parliamentary and public platforms, including radio and social media, to advocate for foundational learning and highlight key challenges.
- Request foundational learning data and evidence from development partners to inform parliamentary work.
- Engage constituency stakeholders, including PTAs, School Management Committees, teachers' associations and local chiefs, to understand challenges, identify solutions and raise community awareness.
- Visit primary schools and CBCCs in your constituency to better understand barriers to quality foundational learning.

Conclusion

With the government's commitment to foundational learning high, it is essential that Members of Parliament help ensure this commitment leads to sustained action.

Every child in Malawi has the right to quality, relevant education. This means not only being enrolled in school, but learning the basic skills they need to progress through the grades, fulfil their potential and contribute to the future of the country.

Foundational learning is also central to Malawi's national development. Vision 2063 sets out the ambition for Malawi to become an inclusively wealthy and self-reliant nation. This will not be possible unless children develop the literacy, numeracy and socio-emotional skills needed to continue learning, enter the workforce and strengthen the country's human capital.

Parliament has a unique role to play in this mission. Members of Parliament are advocates, legislators, budget approvers, representatives of communities and overseers of government action. These functions give Parliament the authority and responsibility to ensure foundational learning is treated with the urgency it deserves.

This briefing is intended to support Honourable Members to take this issue forward: to investigate why too many children are not learning the basics, to scrutinise whether policies and budgets are reaching classrooms, and to hold government and partners accountable for progress.

Ensuring every child learns is not only an education priority. It is a national priority for Malawi's children, its communities and its future.

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